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PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS FOR THE INDEPENDENT PRINT MEDIA IN BOSNIA

FOREWORD

In September 1997 IREX conducted an assessment of the independent print media in Bosnia in order to determine how it might support the professional development of the press. The assessment, funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, focused primarily on print media, although the broadcast media were included in the assessment to the extent that the situation they face contributes to the circumstances within which the print media operate. A wide variety of professionals were interviewed: editors and managers of newspapers and magazines; journalists, both free-lancers and those employed by independent media; foreign donors; staff members of other media organizations; representatives of state and party media; and other foreign and local professionals knowledgeable about the Bosnian media. This approach provided the assessment team with a variety of viewpoints and ensured that its view of the media was complete.

CONCLUSIONS

Citizens must have access to comprehensive and unbiased information independent of the state or ruling party if they are to participate fully in the democratic political process. A professional broadcast and print media fulfill this essential function by providing reporting that is objective and based on fact. In the countries of Eastern and Central Europe undergoing the transition to democracy and free markets, an independent press is of particular importance. Historically, the state media and Communist Party media determined the flow of information. The independent media is a new and fragile institution in the region.

The independent print media in Bosnia face six basic problems in the post-Dayton environment:

- ◆ **The Political Environment** The legal and regulatory system does not support freedom of the press. The media are subject to political pressure, intimidation and violence. This reduces the amount of information available across the borders of the entities that make up Bosnia and weakens professional reporting within those entities.
- ◆ **The Economic Environment** Poor economic conditions mean that few independent publications will be sustainable financially in the near future—advertising revenue is scarce and newspapers and magazines have low circulations.
- ◆ **Media Management** There are too few experienced and trained business managers and specialists in marketing and sales. This compounds the difficulties posed by the economic environment.
- ◆ **Journalism** Inexperienced and poorly trained journalists predominate in the independent media. This absence of professional skill is compounded by editorial direction that is often biased in favor of particular parties, factions and ethnic groups.
- ◆ **Printing and Distribution Infrastructure** The distribution system is antiquated—a problem made worse by political problems

and ethnic divisions. Moreover, printing facilities are inadequate and often controlled by the government or political parties.

- ◆ **Professional and Trade Associations** Trade and professional associations are in the early stages of institutional development. There is little cooperation across borders.

But the picture is not all dark. Bosnia has a core of dedicated and professional journalists who are

making personal sacrifices to ensure that independent media develop. Journalism is attracting young and talented people, and publications and journalists themselves have taken the first steps towards cooperation both within and between the Bosnian entities.

PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

Just as Belgrade Television helped initiate the Bosnian war, the current state and party media in Bosnia hinder the implementation of peace. They operate not to provide citizens with accurate information they need to participate in the political process, but to promote state or political party views. Frequently, this can mean the promotion of ethnic exclusivity, opposition to political pluralism, and the support of the ruling party.

In a country torn by war and divided by ethnicity, independent media can make information available that provides an alternative to what is provided by state and party-controlled media. Independent media that make objective and fact-based reporting available to all citizens can help in the development of democratic institutions and the stabilization of Bosnia. However, the independent media must overcome severe obstacles before they can develop into sustainable providers of objective, fact-based information. In addition to the difficulties imposed by the political and economic realities of the post-war environment, the media lack the supporting institutional infrastructure of democratic media law and regulations and effective professional and trade associations. Most troublesome are the shortage of professional, well-qualified journalists and the absence of effective business management at most media outlets.

THE POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

The independent media and independent journalists face severe political pressure ranging from intimidation to violence. This is compounded by the absence of a legal and regulatory environment that protects the rights of journalists and private media. The most severe forms of pressure have been used against both independent and state media in Republika Srpska. Alternative and independent media outlets have been bombed or threatened with violence. The destruction of the offices of *Alternativa* magazine in Doboj is one example. Physical violence has been used against state media as a result of the battle for political control between factions of the leadership of Republika Srpska in Banja Luka and Pale. Transmitters have been destroyed and Gordon Matrak, the editor-in-chief of the state-controlled *Glas Srpski*, twice had his car bombed. Journalists have been threatened and beaten. Political parties and government officials pressure independent media to tailor their coverage or avoid certain topics. However, the new leadership that came to power in the Republika Srpska in the winter of 1998 offers hope that the situation will improve.

This political atmosphere contributes to the lack of information available to citizens throughout Bosnia. Few newspapers and magazines are distributed across borders. Some papers have distribution agreements with counterparts across entity borders, but these agreements generally mean the distribution of only a few hundred copies, with far fewer actually sold.¹

A further problem is an absence of reporting on information across borders and between ethnic groups. Papers in the Republika Srpska report little on events in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (the Federation) and vice versa. While some of this represents a lack of interest on the part of readers, much may be the result of self-censorship by editors due to fears of political pressure. In addition, the information that is published is often negative and sensationalistic.

Most damaging to the long-term prospects for the independent media, however, may be more subtle forms of discrimination. The most serious for the financial status of independent media include pressure put on advertisers, limited access to state-controlled printing and distribution, and political support given to certain publications. People interviewed at several papers told of occasions when potential advertisers chose not to advertise in their publications due to pressure from state or party authorities. In some cases, these companies provided financial assistance on the side. More often, the paper simply lost this potential revenue.

On the other hand, publications controlled by the state or favored political parties often receive advertising from companies and businesses trying to curry favor with government authorities and political leaders. Even without intimidation, these companies would be limited in their ability to advertise in independent media since they spend the bulk of their advertising budget in state and party-controlled media. In addition, major printing presses and distribution systems are also controlled by the state or political parties. When

papers try to set up their own kiosks, municipal authorities often deny them access to the best kiosk locations by reserving prime sites for political supporters.

THE ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

The economy of Bosnia was seriously damaged during the war and after Bosnia was never among the richer republics in Yugoslavia. It suffered an economic crisis in the decade before the dissolution of the country and the outbreak of war, a crisis that included inflation, unemployment, severe drops in production and exports, and rising debt. The war then led to the death or dislocation of hundreds of thousands of citizens, destroyed factories and farmland, cut the country off from natural trade outlets, and severed economic ties among the regions of Bosnia itself. The economy of Republika Srpska, which possessed a lower economic base than even the rest of Bosnia before the war, has been particularly hard hit, suffering additional hardships from sanctions imposed by Serbia, isolation from Western assistance and investment, and political instability.

In such conditions, the independent media have an extremely difficult time becoming financially sustainable. The economy cannot generate the advertising revenue necessary to support the media. A recent issue of *Svijet*, a weekly political and cultural magazine, included less than 7 pages of advertising in its 80 pages. Of these 3 1/2 pages were ads by foreign companies. Most newspapers and magazines see foreign advertisers such as Coca-Cola, Benetton, Opel, and others as a possibly expanding source of revenue. Yet, as the editor of one magazine said, these companies will not advertise in all independent media. They will, instead, choose to advertise in only a few. Advertising by domestic companies often goes unpaid or is paid by barter rather than cash. In fact, to pay for ads, advertisers have furnished many offices in independent newspapers and radio stations.

In addition to problems with selling advertising space and collecting payment, the circulation of most independent papers and magazines is too low to generate sufficient revenue. Not only is the ability to sell advertising space inhibited by the limited reach of newspapers, the revenue from subscriptions and newsstand sales is small. High unemployment and low wages mean that many people do not buy newspapers and magazines. If they do have the money, they will often purchase entertainment or cultural magazines rather than newspapers or newsmagazines. Circulation for the leading inde-

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¹ There are, for example, two agreements between publications in Banja Luka and Sarajevo. One is between *Novi Prelom* and *Dam*; the other between *Nezavisne Novine* and *Vecernje Novine*. Some cross-border efforts have been assisted by international donors. These include the distribution of an insert (*Ogledalo*) in papers in the Federation and the Republika Srpska.

pendent newspapers and journals ranges between 2,000 and 10,000 copies. *Oslobodjenje* was the leading Bosnia paper before the war, with a circulation of 60,000 in 1989. It has seen its circulation drop to less than 15,000.

These poor economic conditions and the difficulties they cause with advertising and circulation mean that few, if any, newspapers and magazines can fully cover their operating costs. Independent publications and those affiliated with or supported by smaller parties are probably able to cover between 20 and 60 percent of these costs. A prominent monthly magazine claimed that it was covering 60 percent of its costs and envisioned financial sustainability within one to two years. Most papers are in far more serious circumstances and often simply cease publishing for lack of funds. In contrast, state and party affiliated media are more insulated from the effects of the economy. They receive heavy subsidies or other kinds of preferable treatment by their governments.

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Few people working in the independent media in Bosnia have much experience in business management. This compounds the difficulties posed by the poor economy. Bosnia does not have a long history of private media and most of today's independent media arose during or after the war. Many of the new operations were started by journalists seeking to establish papers that met their journalistic or political principles. But they did not bring business experience to these ventures and did not give sound business management a high priority. This was reinforced by the reality that immediate financial self-sufficiency would not be achieved and the expectation that international donors would provide financial support to many.

Most of the editors and managers interviewed felt a need for immediate and intensive management training. Many feared that the foreign presence in Bosnia would shrink and that as it did, so would the financial support given to the independent media. Virtually all interviewed said they would go out of business if Western donors pulled out of Bosnia. Given this, there is a growing realization that they must run their papers more efficiently in order to cut costs and make more effective use of the revenue and foreign assistance they now receive. Several papers have indicated that they may become

financially sustainable in the near or medium term and need to enhance their management capabilities immediately in order to make the transition from dependence on foreign support to financial independence. As the economies of the Federation and Republika Srpska improve, publications that are better managed will be better able to benefit from the opportunities presented.

JOURNALISM

Bosnia, with only a short history of independent journalism, suffers from a shortage of professional journalists and editors able to present well-written, objective news stories. Before 1989 the media was tightly controlled and journalists were given little freedom—only in 1989 was the first paper, *Oslobodjenje*, able to break from party or state control. While others followed suit, the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the war that followed halted this process. Many of the more experienced and qualified journalists left the country, leaving young and untrained journalists in their place.

With the growing politicization of life in Bosnia and the war, many journalists and editors felt forced to take sides and abandon their journalistic independence. This has had a serious effect on journalism in Bosnia. When many young journalists received their on-the-job training, they often saw themselves as participants in the conflict and, with their editor's blessing, used their journalism to support one side. This meant not only that their reporting about the opposing side was negative and biased, but also that they chose not to produce negative stories about their own side. This legacy continues today in Bosnia—most papers and journals clearly favor one party, faction, or ethnic group. While some papers and magazines maintain a more objective stance, including *Reporter* in Banja Luka and *Dan* in Sarajevo, many suffer from bias shown by both editors and journalists.

Editors interviewed indicated that the lack of well-trained, professional journalists is a serious problem throughout Bosnia. They have a difficult time finding qualified, well-trained young people. Given this, they must devote the time and effort needed to train their reporters in the basics of journalism. The editor of *Reporter* indicated that even his top young journalists require extensive editing, often on basic issues. This problem also reflects the decline of formal journalism training since the breakup of Yugoslavia—the only journalism faculty in Bosnia is at Sarajevo University. Most Serbs and Croats would probably not be willing to attend it in the current environment.

Despite these problems, there are positive signs for the development of journalism. Surveys indicate that up to 30 percent of young adults consider journalism a possible career. Opportunities abound for part-time positions (although often unpaid) and many radio stations use unpaid interns extensively. In addition, Western organizations have begun training young journalists, supplementing the training provided by the journalism faculty at Sarajevo University. However, these training courses are short-term and often limit attendance to those who speak English.

⁷ Figures are often inaccurate as many media overestimate their circulation. The unreliable distribution system also means that the papers themselves do not have accurate figures for the number of copies sold. Estimates of *Oslobodjenje's* circulation range from 10,000 to 15,000.

PRINTING AND DISTRIBUTION

Printing and distribution remain serious problems in Bosnia. Before the breakup of Yugoslavia, there was an extensive distribution system not only within republics, but also across republican borders. Printing facilities adequate for the needs of the media existed and were open to all media (since all media were controlled by the state or party). The breakup of Yugoslavia and the outbreak of war in Bosnia led to the dissolution of this printing and distribution system. The systems that arose are inadequate for the needs of the private and independent media.

The inadequacies of the existing distribution system include an inability to acquire accurate sales figures, major delays in payments to papers by the distributor, and the political problems described above. Most papers question the sales figures that the distributors provide. Many believe that the numbers distributors give for papers sold are reduced so that the distributor can skim profits from the difference. In addition, the distributor often relies on reporting from kiosks. This, too, is open to abuse. Payment (based on the reported sales figures) is often as much as four months behind. This creates financial problems and weakens the papers' ability to respond to market forces as distribution rates change regionally.

Many papers supplement the traditional formal distribution systems with other means such as street vendors, purchase of their own kiosks, and point-of-sale displays in supermarkets and other stores. However, these efforts are often made by publications acting alone, and there has been no large scale cooperation among papers and magazines to reduce costs. Few can afford their own kiosk system and delivery trucks or vans (many use personal cars for deliveries). Since the papers and magazines are small and serve large geographic areas, a cooperative effort at creating an independent distribution system would be most efficient.

The control of printing presses and the quality of printing poses another problem for independent newspapers. Independent magazines and newspapers are too small to have their own printing facilities (*Oslobodjenje* does, but this is a legacy of its earlier status as the party paper). Therefore, they rely primarily on printing houses controlled by the state or political parties. A second option is to print in other countries. For example, *Reporter* in Banja Luka prints in Belgrade and *Svijet* in Sarajevo prints in Zagreb. One result has been that *Reporter* has missed several breaking stories because its press is so far away. This kind of problem is reduced when a paper uses domestic presses, but independent papers are often given the lowest priority for printing. An improvement in the printing situation will depend partly on the economy. If it improved, printing would become profitable and the market would fill this gap. However, the political environment must also let truly independent printing houses survive.

Current signs in the Federation point toward a printing and distribution system controlled by the nationalists and supported by the government. This parallels the shift in the development of televi-

sion and radio. The government, fearing the effects that full implementation of the Dayton Accords would have on state media, has been helping in the creation of television and radio controlled by the Muslim nationalist paper *Ljiljan*. The effect of this on the development of nationalist-controlled television, radio, and distribution systems is uncertain, but it provides another example of the political problems affecting the media.

PROFESSIONAL AND TRADE ASSOCIATIONS

Professional and trade associations are a vital element in the development of democratic media. They represent their members' interests before the government and public, provide member services such as in-service training, and offer a network within which members can cooperate.

Journalist associations exist in both the Federation and Republika Srpska. However, there is little cooperation between associations in the two entities, and there is no Bosnia-wide association. Moreover, the existing associations are not well-developed, nor have they been active in the development of independent media.³ The associations are internally divided, their memberships are not inclusive, and many journalists neither join nor actively participate. The independent association in the Federation has been riven by many internal battles. The association in the Republika Srpska has been more stable, but political circumstances limit its actions and capabilities.

The strength of an inclusive nonpartisan association would be beneficial in many areas. Professional and trade associations can be advocates for freedom of speech. They can offer expertise and lobbying on behalf of a democratic legal and regulatory framework for the independent print and broadcast media. And they can serve as partners for Western assistance, developing their own capacity in the process. The existing associations have done this to some degree, but they have fallen short of their potential to improve the independent media. ♦

This report was written by Mark Whitehouse with contributions from Ljiljana Smajlovic, Ed Baumeister, Peter Herford, and Davor Glavas.

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³ Members of these associations have been active and they often claim to act on behalf of their associations, but this activity has not been institutionalized.